

THE DECLARATION  
ON CHILD POVERTY

# A FAIR CHANCE FOR ALL CHILDREN

April 1986

*Child  
Poverty  
Action  
Group* \_\_\_\_\_



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THE DECLARATION ON CHILD POVERTY

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## INTRODUCING THE CHILD POVERTY ACTION GROUP

The **Child Poverty Action Group** is a public-interest, advocacy and research body committed to:

- a) eliminating child poverty in Canada, and
- b) ensuring that all children in Canada have equal life chances for their development.

Our members and supporters include interested citizens, community leaders, social agency representatives, and social policy experts. This declaration articulates our basic contentions about the causes of child poverty and proposes program and policy solutions based on our analysis.

Our objectives are to:

- initiate and support research into the causes and consequences of child poverty;
- propose and promote solutions.
- raise public awareness of the issues and solutions;
- work with interested citizens and organizations with similar aims;
- educate and lobby politicians and their advisors at all levels of government.



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## 1.0 THE NATIONAL NEGLECT OF CHILDREN: A DISTURBING FACT

### 1.1 The national neglect of children is a fact of Canadian society and public policy.

Fewer and fewer children in Canada are free from the risk of poverty. In 1984, an estimated 1.2 million children were living in poverty in Canada - an increase of more than one-third since 1980<sup>1</sup>. Particularly vulnerable are:

- children in single parent families headed by women, 60 per cent of whom were living in poverty in 1984;
- children in families with parents under the age of 25;
- children in families with three or more children;
- children in families headed by an unemployed parent.

Even the children of employed parents are not free from the risk of poverty. In fact, between 1980 and 1984, the poverty rate for families headed by persons in the labour force (the "working poor") increased by 31 per cent.

The Child Poverty Action Group contends that a disturbing fact now exists in Canada, one which can only be described as the **national neglect of children**. Although best illustrated by rising poverty rates, this fact is also reflected in recent patterns of social spending restraint. Social programs, too modest to begin with, are slowly eroding, particularly those benefitting families with children. In the past year alone, family allowances have been de-indexed and the income threshold for receiving the maximum child tax



credit has been reduced. As a result, a family with three children and a total annual income of \$26,000 will lose over \$400.<sup>2</sup>

Although all Canadian families have seen their average incomes drop between 1980 and 1984, families in the lowest income groups suffered the largest loss in percentage terms, a decline of between 10 and 12 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

Since 1980, the burden of increased federal taxes has been disproportionately borne by low income families. By 1990, these families will pay 60 to 100 per cent more in taxes than they did in 1980 while some upper income families will experience little or no increase.<sup>4</sup>

Children may be seen as having less of a claim on public resources than other citizens, partly due to their lack of political power and partly due to shifts in the demographics of the Canadian population. While there was a 7 percent decline in the number of children under 15 between 1976 and 1981, there was a 17.6 percent increase in the number of persons over 65<sup>5</sup>, drawing attention to the needs of elderly citizens.

Children have always been among the most vulnerable members of our society. But, children are no longer merely vulnerable: they are now victims - victims of government economic policies developed in response to the recession. *location - focus spending cuts*

**1.2 It is the birthright of every child living in Canada to be offered conditions which provide equality of life chances to develop as a person and to contribute as a citizen of the community.**

"Equality of life chances" means that every child should, as a right of birth, grow up in conditions conducive to his or her optimal development. Children have a right to become productive, fulfilled, and responsible citizens. Thus, "optimal development" requires that the knowledge, skill, and talent of all children be nurtured and that their faculties of reason, love, and moral capacity (e.g., compassion, generosity, the ability to give and receive pleasure) be allowed to develop.

**1.3 Child poverty exists when there is serious inequality of life chances for the optimal development of all children. Parental income and its impact on the family environment greatly influence children's life chances.**

Children do not choose the environment into which they are born. Yet, children's life chances are at present largely determined by the accident of birth. Although parental income is not the only factor affecting family environment and children's life chances - others are class and parental education - it is a major one. The parents' income affects all aspects of a child's life, including:

- health and access to health care. (In Canada, the infant mortality rate is almost twice as high for the poorest segment of the population as for the most economically advantaged.<sup>6</sup>);
- quality of food and clothing.
- the quality of education children receive and whether they will graduate from school or leave early. (Numerous studies have



shown that parental income, among other factors, influences children's academic performance, expectations, and vocational aspirations. School drop-out studies have drawn strong correlations between size of family and parental income and early school leaving<sup>7</sup>);

- whether they obtain a post-secondary education. (If a child's parent has a university degree, there is a 40 per cent chance that the child will obtain a post-secondary education; if, on the other hand, a child's parent did not attend university, there is only a 10 per cent chance that he or she will attend university<sup>8</sup>.)
- the kind of cultural advantages children are offered. (Poor families spend a significantly greater percentage of their incomes on basic necessities, such as food, clothing and shelter, than do families with high incomes - 69.8 per cent and 42.4 per cent respectively in 1982. Consequently, low income families have considerably less disposable income for cultural and social opportunities for their children, such as private lessons, recreation, and school trips.<sup>9</sup>)
- the type of house or apartment and, consequently, the kind of neighbourhood in which children are raised.

**1.4 All Canadians, whether or not they are parents, have a responsibility to support policies and social conditions favourable to good parenting and to meeting the developmental needs of all children.**

A society's future rests with its children. They are our future citizens and the next generation of taxpayers, productive workers and

parents. The care and nurturing of children should, therefore, be seen as a shared responsibility among parents, the community and our governments. The parental role should be accorded the same public status as the work role. The needs and obligations of all parents must receive urgent recognition in government employment, housing and income policies.

Parenting is clearly a source of personal fulfillment for men and women. But it is also a contribution which some adults make to the general community - a contribution which entails economic costs and other sacrifices for parents. (It has been estimated that it costs between \$66,800 and \$106,800 to raise a child from 0 to 18, depending on whether day care is included<sup>10</sup>. This is an annual cost of between \$3700 and \$5900. If responsibility for post-secondary education were included, this amount would increase by about \$1,000 to \$5,000 a year.)

*Continuation*

The Child Poverty Action Group contends that the national neglect of children is rooted in a cultural and political bias against parenting. The significant contribution which parents make to the general community is not adequately recognized and supported. This is seen in many ways:

- the inadequacy of parental incomes;
- the lack of affordable and appropriate family housing. (In 1985, there were over 15,000 people on the waiting list for Ontario's rent-geared-to income family housing program.<sup>11</sup>);



- the shortage of regulated child care services for working families. (Based on the number of mothers of young children in the labour force, there are only enough spaces to serve less than 20 per cent of children needing day care in Canada.<sup>12</sup>);
- the lack of alternative work arrangements to allow parents to meet the competing demands of work and family life. (A recent survey of Metro Toronto employers found that only 25 per cent of workplaces offered any form of alternative work arrangement, such as flex-time, job sharing or family leave.<sup>13</sup>)

Parents on low incomes experience society's bias against children and parenting more acutely than do economically advantaged parents who have greater control as to where they live and work. Parents who own their own homes do not have to contend with the anti-child bias of many rental arrangements. Economically well-off parents are also more likely to work in jobs which allow greater flexibility in balancing work and family life. Low income parents, by contrast, not only have fewer choices as to where they live and work, but they also lack the financial resources to meet adequately the costs of raising their children.

**1.5 Canada's future rests with all our children. If child poverty is allowed to continue, an underclass of Canadian citizens will exist in our midst for generations to come.**

It is wasteful and unjust to allow child poverty to exist in an affluent society like Canada. The personal effects of growing up in poverty may be devastating for children. Equally important, the social inequality reflected in rising poverty statistics is potentially divisive -- it threatens productivity, solidarity among

citizens, and social stability. We are beginning to witness the social costs of inequality and child poverty, through the re-emergence of private charities such as food banks and hostels for the provision of basic necessities.

*Continuation*  
Children growing up in poverty are poorly equipped to become contributing citizens. "Inequality of life chances", for many children, means that they are destined to a life of marginality. Studies have shown that poor children, as adults, are far more likely to remain at the margins of society - in employment, in housing, in their inter-personal relationships<sup>14</sup>. We contend that Canadians do not want to live in a country which relegates many of its citizens to the status of a permanent underclass.

*Continuation*  
**1.6 Canadian public policy has failed families with children. Governments have not ensured parents adequate incomes through either employment or income support programs.**

Canada's social security system was built on the fragile assumptions of full employment and rising incomes. Yet, full employment does not exist in the mid 1980's. And employment earnings do not guarantee adequate parental incomes because:

- there are significant income disparities between women and men, with women earning only two thirds the average wage of men for full-time work;
- Canadians are increasingly having to rely on part-time and seasonal work to support their families;
- the minimum wage level in all Canadian provinces is too low for parents to support children. (In Ontario, a person working at

the minimum wage for forty hours a week would earn \$8,320, over \$5,000 less than the poverty line for a single parent with one child.)

- a majority of Canadian workers, including parents with family responsibilities, remain outside the economic and social benefits of labour union representation;
- neither wages nor work-related income support programs adequately recognize family responsibility, since our wage system is based on the economic principle of individual productivity and does not take into account the economic costs of parenthood.

The shortcomings of existing employment policies and related programs, combined with consistently high levels of unemployment, have taken their toll on Canadian parents. In 1986, the fundamental causes of child poverty in Canada are parental unemployment and woefully inadequate employment earnings.

Many parents face the added problem of working in unsuitable jobs which may be incompatible with their obligations to their children. A single parent of pre-school children cleaning offices until 2:00 a.m. offers a striking example of "unsuitable" parental employment.

Canadian families with children have also been let down by our social security system. Existing federal and provincial income support programs are limited and outdated, and represent a conceptually inadequate way of addressing child poverty in the 1980's. Family allowance payments are seriously insufficient to cover even minimal support for children. Fewer parents are now eligible for the federal



child tax credit. Cumbersome legal arrangements allow absent parents to ignore their financial responsibilities to their children. By failing to enforce court-ordered child support payments, the law does not adequately protect the economic interests of the children of single parents.

The Child Poverty Action Group contends that provincial social assistance programs are injurious to children by failing to provide adequate levels of income, as well as being a continuing source of humiliation to parents. The concept of "welfare" is stigmatizing and demeaning to the dignity of parents and the well-being of children. Even if payment levels were not so inadequate, 'welfare' would still be an inappropriate way to provide parental incomes because it does not reflect the important contribution which parents make to the general community. 'Welfare' is perceived as funding people on the basis of failure or personal limitations, rather than on the basis of entitlement or reward. We find it totally unacceptable that the provincial welfare system is the instrument used to provide basic incomes for families with children.

## **2.0 EQUAL LIFE CHANCES FOR ALL CHILDREN LIVING IN CANADA**

### **2.1 National Policies for Children**

The elimination of child poverty calls for a comprehensive set of policies based on:

- employment and labour market policies which represent a serious commitment to full and suitable employment, and to earning equity, for parents;
- a major re-structuring of the income benefits and contribution burdens of the tax system to recognize the special needs and responsibilities of parents; and
- a significant extension of public education, housing, and child development programs to promote the optimal development of all children.

### **2.2 The Call for Immediate Action**

A First Ministers' conference within the next twelve months to negotiate:

- the transfer of responsibility for meeting the income needs of parenting households from the provinces to the federal government;
- the establishment of a National Income Program for Children, based on a fundamental re-structuring of the tax system and the adoption of employment and labour market policies to benefit parents and children.

- the redefinition of federal and provincial responsibilities for support to families with children, based on the extension of public education, housing, and child development programs.

### 2.3 The National Income Program for Children

The National Income Program for Children has two major components:

- A Universal Child Income Credit, and
- A Parental Employment Income Guarantee.

The National Income Program for Children would guarantee a social floor of incomes for households with children, regardless of the employment status of the parents. It should be stressed that the introduction of the program would not increase government deficits. Affordability can be ensured by a major and long-overdue restructuring of the tax system. The integration of tax revenue and expenditures, with appropriate tax-back arrangements, would create significant re-distribution of the burdens and benefits of taxation. Both vertical and horizontal redistribution would be achieved by:

- shifting more of the public revenue burden from individuals to enterprises;
- shifting more of the public revenue burden from economically less advantaged households to economically advantaged earners (e.g. with incomes over \$40,000 and no dependents);
- shifting more of the tax benefits from economically advantaged earners to economically less advantaged households;



- where equivalent income levels exist, shifting more of the tax benefits from households without children to households with children;
- reviewing costly and excessive exemptions and deductions (e.g., for investment income and capital gains);

The introduction of the National Income Program for Children would necessitate a review of the continuing relevance of the existing tax expenditures and benefits for families with children, such as the child care expense deduction and dependent child exemption.

Following is a more detailed description of the two components of the National Income Program for Children. The dollar amounts should be interpreted as illustrating the scale of the proposals, rather than as firm or final recommendations.

### 2.3.1 Universal Child Income Credit

#### a) Purpose of the Income Credit

The Universal Child Income Credit is designed to recognize differences in responsibility between parenting and non-parenting households at equivalent income levels. The amount of the income credit is based on the estimated average cost of raising a child in Metropolitan Toronto.\*

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\* Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, "The Cost of Raising a Child In the Toronto Area" Social Infopac, Volume 3, Number 5, November 1984.

b) Entitlement

All parents of children 18 and under. "Parent" would include any caregiver with whom the child is residing, including biological parents, grandparents, foster parents.

c) Amount of Credit

one child	\$3,600 per year
subsequent children	\$3,000 per year for each child

Further research is required to determine an appropriate reduction rate. We would anticipate that the level would not fall below 50 per cent of the maximum amount of the credit.

d) Method of Payment

Parents may choose to receive the income benefit as:

- a "cash credit" in the form of monthly advance payments from the federal Revenue Department; or
- a "tax credit" claimed upon the submission of the annual income tax return.

**2.3.2 Parental Employment Income Guarantee**

a) Purposes of the Guarantee

The Parental Employment Income Guarantee would serve two purposes:

- i) to compensate for the absence of adequate and suitable parental employment - the fundamental cause of child poverty in Canada today; and

- ii) to give parents a choice about whether to withdraw temporarily from employment to assume a more active parenting role at critical stages of their child's development.

b) Entitlement

- i) The guarantee would be available to the highest wage earning parent, residing with a child 18 or under, who either is seeking employment or is employed to bring him/her to the social floor of employment income.\*

To qualify for the guarantee, a parent would register and be willing to accept employment through a Community Parental Employment Service.

- ii) The maximum guarantee would also be available to any parent residing with a child under the age of 2 as income replacement for temporary withdrawal from employment. A further 12 months of the guarantee would be available to any parent of children aged 2 to 12. (Job protection provisions would have to be expanded so that a parent will not be penalized for temporary withdrawal from employment.)

The guarantee may be used jointly or individually by parents up to the maximum benefit. (Possible ways of

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\* The issue of entitlement for the second parent in situations where both parents are either unemployed or receiving employment incomes significantly below the social floor is complicated. Further research will need to be done in this area.



integrating the Parental Employment Income Guarantee and maternity benefits under UIC will have to be explored.)

c) Amount of the Guarantee

Factors such as the precise income needs of families of various sizes and in different life cycle situations will have to be taken into consideration in establishing the amount of the guarantee. Agreement will have to be reached regarding a reasonable standard or reference point.

For the sake of discussion and illustration, we suggest that the maximum benefit be no less than 60 per cent of the Canadian average industrial wage, an amount of \$13,200 a year.\* We feel that this is an appropriate employment income standard for any adult, and absolutely essential for a parent.

Parents of children under 2 who have temporarily withdrawn from the labour force, as well as unemployed parents of children over 2, would receive the maximum guarantee. Employed parents of children over 2 would receive an amount less than the maximum. How much less will depend on the reduction rate. Further research is required to determine a reasonable rate of supplement reduction to achieve appropriate levels of equity or redistribution.

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\* The average industrial wage for Canada, as of October 1985, was \$21,997.

d) Method of Payment

The Parental Employment Income Guarantee would be a supplementary income credit forwarded in monthly payments to eligible parents from the federal Revenue Department.

**2.4 Provincial Child Support Advance Payments**

A special provincial government fund should be established to advance on a routine basis court-ordered child support payments to the parent residing with the child. The parent with the court ordered child support responsibility would forward the required payment to the provincial government fund. Although responsibility for enforcing child support orders now rests with the provincial government in several provinces, the advance payment would compensate parents for lengthy delays or the absent parent's inability to pay. Further research is required to determine a special tax rate for child support payments.

**2.5 Employment and Labour Market Policies**

- a) Full employment must become the first priority for national economic policy, with particular attention to the importance of suitable employment for parents. Recognition must be given to the fact that child poverty will be eliminated only if parents are able to earn an adequate employment income through participation in the labour force.
- b) Labour market policies aimed at reducing inequalities in earnings should be instituted. In recognition of the current income disparity between men and women, the principle of equal pay for

work of equal value should be introduced and enforced. Other methods should also be explored to ensure that minimizing inequalities in earnings become as much of a government priority as reducing unemployment.

- c) A Community Parental Employment Service should be offered in all Canadian communities under the joint management of labour, industry, community agencies and governments. The Service would be responsible for defining and securing either suitable employment or appropriate education or training for parents. Employers would be required to report job vacancies.
- d) A joint federal-provincial program of guaranteed public employment in socially useful work is required.

## **2.6 Extended Education and Child Development Resources**

- a) Financially accessible and high quality child care programs must be available for parents of young children from birth onwards who are engaged in full - or part-time employment. (Federal/provincial funding responsibility)
- b) Universal primary schooling should be available to all children aged 3 and over through the introduction of early education programs. (Provincial responsibility)
- c) Services and resources which promote the optimal development of children should be coordinated and significantly upgraded.
- d) Education enrichment programs should be introduced to assure basic learning skills by the time a child is age 12. (Provincial



responsibility)

- e) The responsibility for implementing all of the above should be under the jurisdiction of a redesignated Ministry of Education and Child Development to include child care, health, child protection, cultural and recreation services. Local boards of education should be re-structured to reflect the new scope of responsibility, with full funding from the provincial and federal governments.

## **2.7 Housing for Parenting Households**

There is an urgent need to undertake the construction of extensive municipal and non-profit housing stock for parenting households. (Shared federal-provincial responsibility)

We recommend that there be a commitment to eliminate within two years the waiting lists for assisted family housing. No more than 25 per cent of a family's income should be assigned for housing costs.

### 3.0 RESEARCH AGENDA

Over the next three years, the Child Poverty Action Group will undertake a program of policy research on the issues associated with the implementation of our proposals. We will examine a range of program and policy questions which will include:

- a) **Tax Implications of the National Income Program for Children.** What are appropriate reduction rates in benefits? What will be the impact on existing tax exemptions, deductions, and marginal tax rates?
- b) **Parental Work Patterns.** What are the factors influencing parental work patterns? What would be the impact of higher benefits on the labour market participation of parents?
- c) **Employment and Labour Market Policies.** What kinds of employment and labour market policies are needed to eliminate child poverty? What is the impact of collective bargaining on parental incomes and supports? How can the work-place support parenting? What programs and benefits are needed to lessen the potential conflict between work and family life?
- d) **Adequate Familial and Parental Incomes.** What is an adequate parental income for families of different sizes? What is the impact of life cycle changes on parental income needs?
- e) **Ethno-Racial Dimensions of Child Poverty.** Are children of certain ethno-racial backgrounds more likely to grow up in poverty? If so, what are the social policy implications?

- f) **Expansion of Public Resources and Social Programs.** What kinds of social programs should exist to support parenting? How can housing for families with children more adequately support parents and contribute to the optimal development of children?
- g) **Education and Life Chances.** How and why are children from poor families streamed into lower-level programs and lower vocational expectations? How can this differentiation be overcome by educational programs?



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